

SEMONIDES

- 1 Loud-thundering Zeus controls the outcome, lad,
in everything, and makes it how he wants.
Men have no foresight, but from day to day
they live like cattle, knowing not at all
how God will bring each matter to its end;
yet everybody feeds on hope and trust
throughout his vain endeavours. Some await
tomorrow, some the turning of the seasons;
there's no man does not think he'll reach next year
the Wealth-god's darling, and society's.
But one is overtaken by old age
before he makes his goal, others succumb
to grim diseases, others slain in war
Hades escorts below dark earth, while some
die out at sea, by tempests buffeted
and the salt purple deep's unending waves,
when they can make no living on the land;
others again fasten themselves a noose
and leave the sunlight by their own grim choice.
So we are spared no ill, but numberless
dangers and hurts for which we cannot plan
exist for mortals. If I had my way,
we would not cling to sorrow, or so long
torment ourselves by dwelling on our woes.
- 2 When someone died, we would not think of him—
if we had any sense—more than a day.
- 3 For we have time enough for being dead;
for living, just a few unhappy years.
- 4 No life is wholly free from fault or harm.
- 5 . . . runs like an unweaned colt beside its dam.
- 6 A wife?* There's nothing better a man can get
than a good one—and nothing ghastlier than a
bad.

7

God made diverse the ways of womankind.

One he created from a hairy sow;

in her house everything's a mess of filth

rolling about untidy on the floor,

and she herself, unwashed, in dirty clothes,

eats herself fat and wallows in the muck.

One from a wicked vixen he created,

expert in every trick. She misses nothing

so long as it's bad, or even if it's good:

what's good she mostly denigrates, what's bad

she praises. But her moods are changeable.

One from a bitch: a slut, that by herself

gets pregnant; wants to hear and wants to know

every damned thing, peers everywhere and prowls

and yelps although there's no one to be seen.

The man can't make her stop, neither with threats

nor if he knocks her teeth out with a stone

in rage, nor if he speaks with gentle words,

not even if she's sitting among guests,

but all the time he has this hopeless blight.

Another the Olympians shaped from earth

and gave a man: a lame duck, ignorant

of good and ill alike. The only skill

she knows is eating—oh, and when God sends

a frost, to pull her chair up to the fire.

Another from the sea: she has two moods.

One day she sparkles and her face is bright;

a guest who sees her will pay compliments,

'No finer, fairer wife in all the world!'

Another day she's insupportable

to look at or go near to, raging mad

like a bitch over her puppies, savagely

at odds with friends and enemies alike—

just as the sea sometimes stands motionless

and harmless, a delight to those who sail,

in summertime, but sometimes rages wild

with thunderous swell rampaging to and fro.

That's what this kind of woman's like—in mood,

I mean; there's no resemblance in her looks!

Another from an obstinate grey ass,

that after thwacks and curses just consents and does the minimum. And then she eats in the shadows, eats at the hearth, all night, all day; and likewise hungry for the act of love she welcomes anyone that comes along.

One from a weasel—miserable breed, with no fair feature or desirable or lovely or delightful to her name. She's quite resourceless in the bed of love, making the passenger seasick. She's a pest to neighbours with her thieving; often, too, she eats the food that was for sacrifice.

A fancy mare was mother to another, who baulks at chores or anything that's hard and wouldn't touch a millstone, lift a sieve, or clear the shit out, or sit at the stove for fear of soot; and yet compels a man to love her. Twice a day she takes a bath, or three times, some days; then she puts on scent. Her long, lush hair is always combed, and decked with flowers: hah, this sort of woman makes a lovely sight for others, but a plague for the man she belongs to, that's to say unless he's some big tyrant or some sceptred king whose heart takes pride in suchlike fripperies.

One from a monkey: quite the deadiest loss that Zeus has given us, this one. Ugly face—the whole town sniggers when this sort goes past; short in the neck; in all her movements stiff, fixed legs, no bum. Poor sod, who cuddles that! And like a monkey, she knows all the tricks and tropes, oh yes, but doesn't like a joke. She'd do no good to anyone, but looks and thinks all day how she can do most harm.

One from a bee: he's lucky who gets her, for she's the only one on whom no blame alights. Wealth grows and prospers at her hands. Bound in affection with her husband she grows old, her children handsome and esteemed. Among all women she stands out; a charm

divine surrounds her. She does not enjoy
sitting with women when they talk of sex.
Of all the wives that Zeus bestows on men,
this kind's the finest and most sensible.

But all those other breeds, by Zeus' design,
exist and ever will abide with men.

Yes, the worst pestilence Zeus ever made
is women. Even if they look to be
a helpmeet, yet the master suffers most:
the man who keeps a woman in his house
never gets through a whole day in good cheer,
nor will he soon drive Hunger from his door,
that hostile lodger, hateful deity.

When with his household he seems most content,
whether by God's grace or on man's account,
she finds some fault, and girds herself for war.
Where there's a woman, they may not be keen
even to welcome in a visitor.

I'll tell you, she that looks the best-behaved
in fact is the most rotten of them all,
for while her man gawps fondly at her, oh,
the neighbours' merriment: another dupe!

Yes, when the talk's of wives, each man will praise
his own and criticize the other bloke's,
but we don't realize it's equal shares.

For Zeus made wives as his worst pestilence
and fettered us in bonds unbreakable.

It's long been so: remember those who fought
round Troy's old city for a woman's sake
and found a home in Hades, [and again
those others who were murdered at their
hearth . . .]

8 . . . like an eel down in the slime.

9 A heron, coming on a buzzard eating
a fine Maeander eel, took it away.

10 Why do I make a lengthy tale of this?

10a Do not be proud of never washing, nor
a water-maniac; grow no bushy beard,
nor wrap your body in a filthy cloak.

13 And then we had that beetle flying up, which of all creatures follows the most disgusting way of life.

14 A man who in the wooded mountains met
a lion or a leopard, all alone
on a narrow path, would not have been more
scared.

15 To tunny squid's a meal, to gudgeon, shrimps.

16 . . . and rubbed myself with unguents and sweet
scents

and myrrh, seeing among the company
a merchant or so.

17 And I squashed through the entrance at the rear.

18 . . . slouching along, his neck arched like a horse.

20 . . . sacrificing to the Nymphs
and Maia's son,* for they're of shepherd stock.

21a . . . thrown out, weighed down
by their wet garments.

22-3 My word, Telembrotus, your preparations
are quite elaborate . . .

Now here's a wonderful Tromilian cheese from Achaea, that I brought back . . .

24 (A cook speaks)

... and how I roasted and cut up the pork sacrifice-style—I'm not so bad at that.

25 But no one gave so much as a ladleful
of dregs.

26 He cleared away the table and the cups.

27 This one with a peaked rim's an Argive cup.

28 Its hind trotters were twitching.

30 . . . with the thighbones burnt.

31a . . . the dry sticks are on the fire.

42 Gods easily give men the wrong idea.

Semonides

6 *A wife?*: these two lines are a close paraphrase of Hesiod, *Works and Days* 702–3.

20 *Maia's son*: Hermes, a god of herdsmen.